DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 318 029 CS 212 316

AUTHOR Mulcaire, Terry; Grady, Frank
TITLE Composition and the Study of Popular Culture.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (41st, Chicago, IL, March 22-24, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Instruction; *Critical Thinking; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Context; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Instructional Innovation; Literary Genres; *Popular Culture; Reader Text Relationship; *Reading Writing Relationship; Thematic Approach
IDENTIFIERS Bloom (Allan); *Composition Literature Relationship; Hirsch (E D); Literary Canon; University of California Berkeley

ABSTRACT

A required freshman English course at Berkeley was designed on the assumption that: (1) students have already developed a set of sophisticated skills for reading popular culture texts--movies, television, and commercial literary genres--against and in terms of one another; and (2) these skills are not categorically different from those inculcated by teachers of composition or used by literary critics. Juxtaposing popular and elite texts reveals their affiliations and similarities and produces critical insights into both that students are not afraid to own. The class syllabus reflected a horizontal model of culture (rather than a "high" culture vs. "low" culture vertical model), ranging from comic books to Shakespeare, and including several trips to the movies. Such courses could be built around a wide range of themes but would all thematize revision, require instructors to allow students to assert their authority over texts, and subordinate instructors' authority on matters of taste to their authority over questions of compositional technique. It is not the job of the academy to determine cultural standards or to hand down to an uncertainly appreciative audience a model constructed in institutional privacy. Rather, students should be taught to think critically about their own standards and everyone else's, and about the culture of which they are all a part. The practice of composition and the practice of studying culture amount to the same thing. (SR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Terry Mulcaire
Frank Grady
Department of English
University of California,
Berkeley
Berkeley, CA 94720

ED318029

Composition and the Study of Popular Culture

What follows is a description of an English 1B course that Terry and I conceived and taught at Berkeley in 1988 and 1989; we taught this syllabus together once, and each taught it on our own once as well. English 1B at Berkeley at the time was the second half of a year-long composition sequence required of all undergraduates in the College of Letters and Science in which students were required to "write expository prose in conjunction with reading imaginative literature," as opposed to the expository reading in 1A. At the time that Frank and I began discussing the possibility of teaching a 1B class together, the current vogue of a crisis in higher education was at its crest: the controversy over the Stanford Humanities curriculum was in the news, and E.D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom were making waves with their respective diagnoses of the cultural crisis and their respective solutions. Hirsch, of course, saw the problem as a tactical one: students were both coming to and graduating from college without any discernible common culture, and so he proposed replacing a liberal emphasis on teaching formal skills with a conservative emphasis on teaching encyclopedic content. Bloom saw it as a moral problem, and his solution was

CS212316

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
FRANK GRADY
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

indiscriminately to denounce modern culture, and to propose replacing it with a return to Socratic idealism.

We had both taught portions of Bloom and Hirsch in separate composition courses during the previous semester, and we had noticed that for all their differences, they agreed that culture was something college students didn't have, and that the problem was how to give it to them. This conception of the problem seemed to recur consistently among all the other criticisms directed at higher education. On the basis of our own ideas about what "culture" means and our interactions with our students, we disagreed with this view. We decided to teach our course based on the assumption that culture was something that students did in fact possess, but that they tended to leave it at the door when they entered the composition or literature classroom. We thought that our teaching of both composition and literature could benefit from exploiting the fact that students come into the classroom already having been immersed in popular cultural texts--movies, television, and commercial literary genres--and already having developed a set of sophisticated skills for reading them against and in terms of one another. These skills, we would argue, are not categorically different from the techniques teachers of composition inculcate or that literary critics employ when they study canonical, high cultural works. Making popular texts part of the composition curriculum, then, allows students to draw on the skills they possess as students of culture, skills in evaluating the place of a given

text within its genre, in recognizing generic characters and departures from the norms of a tradition, and in tracing the affiliations of one text to another. When students then move to canonical material, they bring with them a confidence in their skills and indeed their authority as readers and writers that renders these texts more congenial and accessible; rather than finding themselves staring down the barrell of the canon, they can continue to read and write successfully in ways already familiar to them. By giving them the chance to practice these skills within a broader cultural context, one that includes both "high" and "low," canonical and non-canonical, this curriculum attempts to put before their eyes the fact that they have been inside culture, interpreting it, all along.

To test what was at that time a hypothesis, we designed a syllabus that would take us from comic books to Shakespeare and that would include several trips to the movies. We started with Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon, a classic hard-boiled detective novel, and followed it with 'A' Is for Alibi by Sue Grafton, a contemporary mystery in that hard-boiled tradition but featuring a woman detective. Then came our comic book, or "graphic novel," if we may: The Dark Knight Returns by Frank Miller, the ultimate--but evidently not the last--Batman story. The Dark Knight portrays Batman as an aging, reactionary vigilante whose actions polarize his society and bring down the wrath of the powers that be (in the form of a certain faster-than-a-speeding-bullet superhero who now works behind the scenes

for the federal government--which is itself headed by a familiar and doddering lover of jellybeans and horseback riding). Then we moved to Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep, a science fiction novel by Philip K. Dick that was the source of the movie Blade Runner; Herman Melville's long story "Benito Cereno," which is based on a revolt that took place on a slave-ship in the 1790's; and finally Shakespeare's Tempest, which we advertised as an example of seventeenth-century popular culture. There was a course reader containing several important essays: some excerpts from E.D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy (which you'll hear more about in a few minutes); a piece by Carol Clover entitled "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film"; Montaigne's famous essay "On Cannibals"; essays by Umberto Eco, Raymond Chandler, and others, and a science fiction story by John Campbell titled "Who Goes There," which was the source of two films, both called "The Thing": a black-and-white version from 1951 directed by Howard Hawks and a 1982 remake directed by John Carpenter. We watched both of those and three other movies: the John Huston "Maltese Falcon," the campy 1968 "Batman," (we missed the opening of the newer "Batman" by about six months) and "Forbidden Planet," everybody's favorite psycho-sexual science-fiction version of The Tempest.

We designed this syllabus based on a horizontal model of culture, rather than the vertical one according to which students leave behind "low" to climb to "high" canonical literature: the latter model serves more than anything, it seemed to us, to make

high culture forbidding or at best uninteresting to students upon their first acquaintance with it. In the former, "elite" and "popular" are no longer invidious terms describing a cultural hierarchy, but merely different addresses for different areas within a horizontal cultural plane. We hoped that juxtaposing popular and elite texts would reveal their affiliations and similarities and produce critical insights into both that students would not be afraid to own. In other words, we hoped that they would discover that the ways they every day construe movies, television, comic books and paperback bestsellers were surprisingly similar to what we asked them to do with Shakespeare and Melville.

Some examples of how things worked in this course:

We began with the theme of detection in The Maltese Falcon and 'A' Is for Alibi, focusing on the way that detectives construct stories about the world using a limited body of evidence, and moved quickly to discussing the implications for composition of this kind of theory of detection: that is, how to make the available facts into a plausible case. What are the technical problems in doing this, and what are the ethical implications of such a constructed or composed version of the truth?

In The Maltese Falcon this turned into a discussion of gender. Sam Spade's supposedly objective pursuit of his

partner's killer turns out to be inseparable from his misogyny. Brigid O'Shaughnessy may actually have committed the murder, but that doesn't relieve us of our uneasy feeling tht Spade has somehow framed her. Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep literalized the terms of this discussion. There the femme fatale of the book is literally the construction of a sexist society: she's an android whose "crime" is to want to be seen as fully human by the detective protagonist. Our discussion of detection as a model for composition ultimately turned into a critique of the "commonsense" notion of objectivity which so many students assume is the ideal of composition; the objectivity of the detective turned out to mask all kinds of covert, subjective interests and manipulations. The achievement of objectivity, in other words, was both a technical problem--which pieces of evidence are pertinent, which irrelevant, and how do I order them into an argument?--and an ethical one--what do we want to be true and why, and how far does this desire tend to distort our account of the facts?

Turning later to Melville's "Benito Cereno", we discussed the protagonist Amaso Delano as a failed detective and hence a failed reader and writer, because of the way he simply denies that his world needs any interpretation or analysis. His unconscious constructions of reality turn out to be based on unexamined racist preconceptions. In sum, we were able to move consistently from thematic issues to compositional ones, and then

again to discussions of the broader social issues that can inform students' own thinking, writing and reading.

When we got to The Tempest, of course, we remembered the end of the well-known movie version of The Maltese Falcon and Sam Spade's definition of the bogus falcon as "the stuff that dreams are made of"--cynically referring to the way that people project their desires onto the world. Spade is quoting Prospero, of course and we talked about how he and Prospero try to do the same thing, projecting their own desires onto the world in such an authoritative way as to overrule the desires of lesser characters.

Spade and Prospero, then, allowed us to connect ideas of authorship and social authority, and when we discussed The Dark Knight Returns we were able to connect authorial figures with the authoritarian personality of Batman. Our discussions centered around the way the authoritarian figure always helps to create and define the anarchic, anti-social force it opposes: in the end, Batman and the Joker recognize that they made and sustain each other, just as Prospero acknowledges Caliban as his own.

This principle of juxtaposing high and low is not limited to the issues we've hinted at here: we think such a course could be built around a wide range of themes. One example could be a course built around the idea of sentimental romance, which might pair Pamela or Pride and Prejudice with contemporary mass market

romances such as Harlequins or Silhouettes. Or quest romances: put Sir Gawain and the Green Knight or Huck Finn with The Wizard of Oz and "Star Wars", or compare Malory's version of the Grail quest to Indiana Jones'. Or the politics of image-making: Machiavelli's The Prince along with Tom Wolfe's The Right Stuff and Hunter S. Thompson's Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail.

Whatever texts they include, one thing these courses will all have in common is the opportunity to thematize revision. In our course that opportunity presented itself repeatedly: in the revisions of the hardboiled mode of The Maltese Falcon offered by Sue Grafton in 'A' Is for Alibi, a book which self-consciously takes up the question "Is this a suitable genre for a woman?"; in the evolution of the character of the Batman from the stalwart crimefighter of the 40's to the campy punster of the 60's to the brooding and bitter figure of the Dark Knight; in the mutliple versions of "The Thing," which move from 1930's Red Scare paranoia through the broad-shouldered American boosterism of the 1951 film to a much more insidious, racially charged (and messier) paranoia in John Carpenter's version; in the sustained attention that "Forbidden Planet" pays to psychological themes inherent in The Tempest. Pursuing the same theme or plot or even character across the landscape of a given genre gave students a sense of how and why that terrain might change, of the way that various historical or social or formal pressures might condition those changes, and the way such pressures could influence their own attempts to achieve a particular effect or reach a particular

audience in their writing. Alternately, it made plain to them the tremendous range of possibilities that revision represents: if Batman and Robin could be changed so utterly, so perhaps could their theses.

The question of authority, too, will always be central to a course built on this model. This kind of pairing of high and low will only work if instructors allow students to assert their authority over the texts, to bring their own standards of taste into the classroom, to decide on their own to a great extent what connections between texts they find interesting. We began our course by reading portions of E.D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy and looking at the now infamous list. We asked our students each to come up with an item or two that should be included on such a list. Then we made a master list from these suggestions and broke the class into groups, each of which had to trim the list by half and defend its choices to the rest of the class. This exercise turned the question of "what's on the list" into the question of "who makes the list, and how," and made the point that cultural canons aren't given, they're made, and that we all participate in that making even if our participation is limited to passive acquiescence. By continuing to confront this issue throughout the course, we tried to keep before their eyes their own responsibility in the construction of cultural norms. Our writing assignments were designed to encourage this sense of authority: we asked them to apply our classroom discussions to pairs or groups of texts of their own choosing, rather than

asking them to write about a specific text or theme. Along these lines, we encouraged students to bounce the ideas we explored in class off their own areas of academic expertise. An art major did an excellent analysis of the juxtaposition of word and image in The Dark Knight Returns; a biochemistry student built her essays on the science fiction texts and movies around what she saw as our society's paranoia about scientific experts.

The instructor, of course, is not silent in this classroom--we bring our own interests and expertise to these discussions. But the instructor's authority on matters of taste is always subordinate to his or her authority over questions of compositional technique, like rhetorical stance, validity of evidence, or argumentative structure. The point of the course is to get students to apply these techniques to their own standards of taste, to argue responsibly and more skillfully about what they like and don't like. And while this model certainly demands a more inclusive curriculum, it sacrifices neither intellectual rigor nor academic standards of compositional quality. Students are encouraged to think critically about their own standards precisely because of their exposure to the various aesthetic and interpretive values of their teachers and fellow students, and the traditional styles of critique aimed at canonical texts. Disagreement can turn into articulate condemnation on the one hand and articulate defense on the other, and a critical consensus can be more than just adoption of the instructor's agenda, for as students learn that their authority and the

teacher's differ in degree rather than in kind, their own stake in the classroom debate becomes clear.

At least, it does most of the time. As successful as this pedagogical model was overall--and between us Terry and I have taught this syllabus or a close relative three times--it did create some problems of its own. While most welcomed the opportunity to study a range of texts they weren't used to seeing in the classroom, even the enthusiastic ones didn't share our tastes uniformly. Some of our eighteen-year-old students actually turned out to have ideas about what constitutes popular culture that departed significantly from ours. Somehow we found this surprising, but we learned that this disagreement could be a productive tool rather than a hindrance, an opportunity for all of us to refine our arguments. We learned a lot in teaching this course, particularly from these students.

Some students, unfortunately, didn't share our tastes but felt obligated to adopt them anyway--and here the differences ended up reinstating a traditional classroom model in which they felt compelled to embrace a cultural standard that they didn't really appreciate. What was an exhilarating experiment for us was business as usual to them, and we have to take some of the blame for that.

A third, much smaller but much more frustrating group had a slightly different reaction. A lifetime of having their likes

and dislikes trivialized and excluded from the classroom had ill prepared them for the day they would discover that their instructors were asking them to celebrate and explore and analyze precisely those likes and dislikes. The resultant brain-lock left a handful of our students unable to write about The Dark Knight Returns, for instance, because it was "just a comic book."

For the great majority of our students this was not the case, though. Now, we realize that to a great extent we're drawing on techniques that composition teachers have for a long time been developing for opening up the classroom and getting students to draw on their own cultural authority as readers and writers. We think that the pairing of high and low texts can be a useful technique in achieving this kind of openness. This particular technique, however, has some further implications for the controversy over the canon, and for the traditional barriers between composition and literary studies. On this model, it is not the job of the academy to determine cultural standards or to hand down to an uncertainly appreciative audience a model constructed in institutional privacy. Rather--and you won't find this surprising--it should--we should--teach students to think critically about their own standards and evertyone else's, and about the culture of which they're all a part.

What we propose, finally, is not that composition be reconceived to include cultural studies, but that the practice of composition and the practice of studying culture be recognized as

amounting to the same thing. We propose not a new way to engage students with what goes on in a composition classroom, but suggest rather that students are already engaged in cultural studies, and that composition classes ought to take full advantage of that engagement.